

for telling folks like that, "We're not going to pay you."

Madam Speaker, this needs to be investigated. There are claims adjusters who were so disgusted with what they saw and what they did to individuals that they have turned the insurance industry in for this fraud that has been perpetrated upon the American people.

Madam Speaker, this Democratic Congress needs to keep faith with the people of America and investigate this, because I am convinced that the biggest Katrina fraud of all was ripping off the American taxpayer to the tune of billions of dollars.

□ 1600

DISASTER RELIEF FOR AFFECTED AREAS IN CALIFORNIA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. COSTA) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. COSTA. Madam Speaker, I, too, feel, as I believe most Americans do, for those who have been impacted by the effects of the disaster that occurred with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. And my colleague and good friend from Mississippi makes, I think, strong arguments that it is part of our responsibilities as representatives of the people's House, to, in fact, respond to needs and crises when natural disasters occur.

My district, the 20th Congressional District in California, includes the heart of California, some of the best farm land in the country, from Fresno in the north all the way down to Bakersfield in the south.

I rise this afternoon to address the concerns, the deep concerns that our constituents have because of a lack of Federal support in declaring Federal designation disaster status for the 31 counties in California that were impacted by the freeze that took place in California between January 11 and January 16.

Now, this is a disaster of significant proportions. Unlike a hurricane or a tornado, as we have witnessed recently in other parts of the country, a dramatic freeze takes on different visual effects. But the damages and the impacts to families and their children and people with farms and farm workers, compesinos, can be just as devastating.

Since January 11, January 16, doing our due diligence, Governor Schwarzenegger has declared 31 counties in California available for Federal designation disaster. Yet, we have gone now 6 to 7 weeks without the Federal Government responding. It believes now the total cost of the impact of this freeze to the farms, to the citrus industry, to the vegetable industry is totaling over \$1.3 billion and growing.

These farm workers, these compesinos, are out of work. These farmers have their life holdings in these citrus orchards. The communities, the economic impacts are reverberating throughout the communities within these 31 counties.

Last Friday, we had a listening session on the impacts of agriculture. We had members from the foodbank in California, the Fresno County foodbank, Sarah Reyes, an old friend and former colleague of mine. She indicated that over 3,100 households, which contain over 14,700 individuals, over 7,425 children under the age of 5 years of age or less, have been provided food because these folks have no jobs, because there are no jobs available, because the citrus industry and related industries have been devastated by this freeze.

It goes on. You know, in places like Orange Cove and Parlier and Reedley and Selma and places in Tulare County, we have seen the need to provide food for families increase 1,000, 2,000 percent. The UFW, faith-based organizations have chipped in. The State has paid millions of dollars. But yet the Federal Government response has been lacking.

We have had bipartisan support from Members of the California congressional delegation, by both our United States Senators. Congressman NUNES and myself have introduced an Impact for Freeze Relief for those farm workers, those farmers, their families and the businesses and these small communities. Yet the President has yet to declare, since January 11 through January 16, that these counties are deserving of Federal designation disaster relief.

But in the meantime, my colleagues, since December 19, 14 other States have been declared Federal designation disaster areas. Nebraska, December 19, for severe winter storms; Kansas, January 28, severe winter storms. The President, on January 7, declared both those States disaster areas. Missouri, Oklahoma, Florida, Illinois, Washington State, winter storms, mud slides, tornados, all deserving, I believe, and the President believed, for Federal designation disaster status.

Yet, 7 weeks later, California, that complied with all the requirements under the Federal law in which our Governor made the request, now finds itself, 7 weeks later, without the sort of Federal designation status that we deserve as taxpayers to the Federal Government.

We ask the President, please respond as you have responded in 14 other cases in these other States. Our citizens need the support and the same sort of help that we have given to other parts of the country.

So I ask, once again today, for the President to respond to FEMA and to produce the Federal designation disaster relief that our citizens in California deserve and need for those farmers, for their families, for those farm workers and for the communities they live in.

30-SOMETHING WORKING GROUP

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of Jan-

uary 18, 2007, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MEEK) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the majority leader.

Mr. MEEK of Florida. Mr. Speaker, it is an honor to come before the House once again. And as you know, the 30-Something Working Group, we come to the floor two, three, sometimes four times in a given week, in a legislative week, to share with the Members some of the issues that we are working on and some of the issues that we must tackle here in the 110th Congress.

As you know, the work of the 30-Something Working Group has been going on now for, going on close to 4 years of hard work and making sure that not only the will of the American people prevails in this House, the people's House, this U.S. House, but to make sure that we act, we legislate in an accountable way; also bring about the kind of oversight, and put us on the new direction that we need to be in several of the areas that we face now, such as Iraq, such as making sure that we have affordable health care, making sure that we have a clean environment, making sure that we take care of our veterans. And fiscal responsibility is the backdrop of the overall accountable flag that we stand under.

Mr. Speaker, a lot has happened in the last couple of weeks, and a lot has happened since the 110th Congress took control of the U.S. House of Representatives, Democratic control, and working in a bipartisan way.

I spent a lot of time on the floor in the past talking about the bipartisan votes that have taken place here on this floor because I think that it is something that we should all be proud of. I am not talking about proud Democrats. I am talking about Republicans, Independents that are paying attention to this process, Democrats, first time voters. Individuals that are thinking about voting should be encouraged about the spirit that we have here in the U.S. House of Representatives and making sure that we bring work products that a majority of the Members can vote for, and that means Democrats and Republicans.

These are a few of the votes that I just want to highlight here once again: implementing the 9/11 Commission recommendations, H.R. 1, which was the first bill, Mr. Speaker, we spoke of that we had the opportunity to lead. When I say "we," I am saying the Democratic majority, to be able to bring to the floor, which was a bipartisan 9/11 Commission. And it was a book that many read, and one of the New York Times bestseller books. Passed 299-128, with 68 Republicans voting for it.

Raising the minimum wage, H.R. 2, which was the second bill in this 110th Congress, this Democratic Congress that came up. Again, we must be reminded that the vote was 315-116, with 82 Republicans voting with the Democrats on that particular measure.

Funding for enhancement of stem cell research, H.R. 3, again, bipartisan vote, 253-174.

Making prescription drugs more affordable for seniors, H.R. 4, 255-170, which is a majority vote in a bipartisan manner.

Something that really means a lot to the 30-Something Working Group, reversing the increase of interest rates to students and also American families that are trying to educate themselves to take advantage of the high-tech jobs that we are trying to provide, and also the skilled labor jobs that we are trying to generate here in our economy, cutting student loans, interest rates in half, which was H.R. 5, which passed by 356 votes to 71.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to really make a case in point as it relates to that particular vote because young people are our future, and even working, some folks think that many of our students graduate from high school and they go right into college. We have many working Americans that have to work and go to school at the same time, or have to work and then go to school later. And they have to take out these student loans. And cutting that interest rate in half is going to mean so much to the forward progress of our young people and our middle-age population that is trying to educate themselves to compete, not only with the person that is standing next to them, but compete against other countries.

And so our education, the education of the people of the United States of America is paramount. And I am so happy to see, and this was one of the major objectives of the 30-Something Working Group, not to just represent those that are graduating from high school, but to also represent those parents that are trying to pay for higher education for their children.

The greatest goal, I think, for a grandparent or a parent is to make sure that their children and grandchildren have better opportunities than what they have had. And I am excited about that opportunity that so many are going to have. Now, we have moved here in the House to cut those interest rates in half.

Also, creating long-term energy initiatives, which was H.R. 6, which passed 264-168, bipartisan vote, something that was needed as it relates to using subsidies for alternative fuels. Making sure that we invest in the Midwest versus the Middle East is something that we have all embraced and something that we all feel very strongly about.

I am going to keep sharing that, Mr. Speaker, because I think it is important. In the 109th Congress, I spent a lot of time here working with the 30-Something Working Group talking about the uncontrollable debt that the Republican Congress kept accruing on behalf of future generations. And I talked about that, and it was a chart, and I had a rubber stamp. But I am going to talk a little bit more about it as we start to look at this question of accountability, the question of oversight, the whole slogan of moving in a new direction, fiscal responsibility.

And I just want to make sure that I paint this picture, because what we are talking about now in the 30-Something Working Group, we used to talk about what we, if we had the opportunity to lead, what we will do. Now we are talking about what we are doing.

But to be able to really paint a good picture, Mr. Speaker, for not only the Members to understand, but also the American people to understand, this is where we are right now, and we didn't just get there last week.

As it relates to foreign debt held by foreign nations, this is as of December 2006. We updated this chart because we had numbers in place. As you know, we had the little Velcro numbers, which I understand that we are going to get that soon so that we can pull it off to really show what is happening here.

We have Japan, that owns a part of the American apple pie at \$644.3 billion. And I think that it is important to understand that they buy our debt. That means they have a piece of the American pie because of a lack of fiscal responsibility, because the President has passed budgets down that has asked for tax cuts for the super-wealthy, that we spent out of control with a lack of accountability and oversight, with two wars that are going on, just continuing to borrow the money with very little oversight.

I am setting the stage for a little later on in our talk here today.

We have China. As of 11/05 it was \$249.8 billion. And now, as of December 2006, China has moved up to \$349.6 billion.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is also important, and I want to ask staff if we can get that Bush chart with the Republican Congress if we have that because I want to just show how historical these numbers are, because one may say, well, you know, there are a couple of wars going on. We have had 9/11. We have had a number of issues.

I have a chart that is really going to show that that is contrary, that logic is contrary to the obvious of what has happened.

□ 1615

It is because the administration has decided to borrow from future generations and the present generation where the economic outlook for our children and grandchildren would not be what it should be because of our lack of responsibility. Thank God that we have a Congress in place right now that is going to put accountability first. Fiscal responsibility we have already adopted in our rules and continue to live under that flag of oversight and a new direction: \$349.6 billion; the U.K., \$239.1 billion; the Caribbean, \$68 billion; Taiwan \$63.1 billion. OPEC nations, again, these are oil-producing nations in the Middle East, Mr. Speaker. Many of these nations the United States have bilateral talks and agreements with, but many of them are in question as it relates to the present situation in the Middle East. But guess what? They

own a piece of the American apple pie. I don't even want to start to talk about gas prices and what is happening as it relates to OPEC nations. You have \$67.8 billion as of 11/2005. And now, Mr. Speaker, December of 2006, OPEC nations, they have gone up in owning more of the American apple pie due to a lack of fiscal responsibility on behalf of the Bush administration and the past Republican Congress. Of the budgets that they have passed, they now own \$100.9 billion of the American apple pie.

Korea, \$70 billion; Hong Kong, \$53.9 billion; Germany, \$52.5 billion.

I think it is important that we pay very close attention to those numbers, and that is something that we should be very concerned about and continue to keep our eye on the prize so that we spend in a fiscally responsible way and that we make sure that we are accountable to the American people. And I feel good about the fact that we have a majority that is willing to fight on behalf of the greater good to make sure that we work on behalf of all of the American people.

Now, this chart is a little old, Mr. Speaker, because these actually have the 2005 numbers, and we are updating it. This is something I feel very fond of because I always said that this chart is going to end up being a part of the national archives one day because it really shows a story, and it is factual.

President Bush in 4 years, in 4 years, has managed to borrow more from foreign nations than 42 Presidents in 224 years of history. Now, these are 2005 numbers. I mean, I just want to make sure that we understand that these are 2005 numbers. So the numbers are higher now. Forty-two Presidents, look at them. All the way from George Washington, they were only able to borrow \$1.01 trillion. President Bush and the Republican Congress, the 108th Congress and 109th Congress, borrowed \$1.05 trillion in just 4 years.

Now, one would say, how can that happen, Mr. Speaker? How do these countries, China of all countries, Red China, own so much of the American apple pie?

Well, I can tell you how it happens. It has happened because the past Republican Congress rubber stamped everything that the Bush administration sent to this floor at the objection of so many Members of the House.

But now the proper leadership has stepped forward and said that we are going to pay as we go. So that means that this budget process will be more controlled than it has ever been in recent history of saying that, if you are going to spend, you are going to show how you are going to pay for it. Not where you are going to get it from because we know where they got it from. They borrowed it. It is like taking out a high-interest credit card and saying, I am knowingly and willingly using this high-interest credit card to carry out spending that I know I can't afford to spend. I know this. I mean, it is not

that it is an emergency. In the budget that the President has sent to this U.S. House of Representatives, the Bush administration budget, it is saying, let us make the tax cuts permanent for the super wealthy. Meanwhile, these countries that I outlined are paying for that tax cut. And I think it is important that we look at that. That is the fiscal responsibility end of the talk here today.

I think it is also important for us to realize the discussion that we are having now on Iraq, Mr. Speaker. We talked about oversight. We talked about accountability. But to date, as of last week, last Friday, there have been 81 hearings on the issue of oversight and accountability on Iraq, across the committees in the House. And I think it is important that the Members pay very close attention to this because, as these hearings continue to happen, we have learned more about what is happening in Iraq, what is happening in Afghanistan, what is happening with our troops here and our veterans here on the ground; hearings were not happening at this rate in the past.

Again, one of the obligations of the 30-Something Working Group is to make sure that everyone and every Member of the House understands that we are here to work, that we are here to make sure that accountability blows through the air conditioning ducts here in the hospital House.

Why are we spending so much time talking about Iraq? Next week there will be a supplemental that will be in committee, and it will be marked up. What we call a markup, that means that there will be a discussion about what goes into that supplemental bill. There will be appropriations, some \$100 billion-plus, that will be in this bill, from what I understand. Why are we spending so much time having so many conversations about what should be in that bill?

This is why, Mr. Speaker: On March 8, as of 10 a.m., 3,178 U.S. troops died; dead, period. As of March 9, which is today, Mr. Speaker, 10 a.m., we have 3,186 troops that are dead. Now, I said, 3,178, as of yesterday, 10 a.m. Today, as of 10 a.m., 3,186. That is the reason why, Mr. Speaker, so many Members are spending time focusing on this issue of Iraq accountability and benchmarks on behalf of the American people and those that are in harm's way. That is not a Democratic issue. That is not a Republican issue. That is not an Independent issue. That is an issue that should be dealt with at the U.S. Congress, and it is going to take courage and leadership and commitment and some tenacity to bring about the kind of change that needs to happen to make sure that those individuals that have died in the line of duty, that their memory is not in vain, and that we accomplish and we have benchmarks and we take the training wheels off the Iraqi government, period, dot. I can't sugarcoat it. It is what it is, and it has to be laid out that way for folks to un-

derstand, for the Members to understand, I must add, that it is very important. This conversation and this debate and the discourse that is taking place in committee, it is very serious, and it should be above politics.

The American people sent a very strong message in November. Democrats and Republicans, I am just going to say, the American people, period, sent a very strong message in November that they wanted to move in a new direction. They want more accountability. They want more oversight out of this U.S. House of Representatives. And they understand what is going on in the White House. There are places where Republicans won elections by landslides in the past. And guess what? In the November election, you couldn't elect a Republican as far as the eye can see or within eight or nine area codes because of the lack of oversight and accountability that was not carried out here in this House in the last couple of sessions of Congress versus this session.

Why is this issue important? As of 10 o'clock today, 23,924 wounded and 10,627 of those cannot return to battle or to duty.

What is in this so-called Defense supplemental bill? Some may talk about benchmarks. I want to talk a little bit about what is in the bill or what is going to be in the bill as the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee starts to what we call mark up and create this bill. The Speaker has said that U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability Act will provide our troops with equipment they need and require Iraqis to take control of their own country, help fight the war on terror and establish a date of withdrawal from Iraq.

Well, what is wrong with that? What is wrong with making sure our troops have what they need when they go to war? Mr. Speaker, I came to the floor 2 weeks ago because I happened to pick up the paper, and I saw some Members were complaining about the fact that the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee was looking to put language in the bill that said, if you are going to deploy a troop into harm's way that that soldier or that troop, that Marine or that sailor or that airman or that Coast Guard person, National Guard, Reserves, you name it, that they have to have the equipment they need to carry out the mission. What is wrong with that? That is almost like sending a football player out in the field without a helmet and shoulder pads and saying, go play. This is serious business. And I named the number of those that are wounded and have died, and I can guarantee you, if we had had some of the language that we are talking about in place, maybe, just maybe, a number of those individuals would be living today. It is important. We are not four-star generals. We are Members of Congress. And we have been sent here to make sure that we are accountable to those that have signed up in a

volunteer Army and a volunteer Marine Corps and a volunteer Navy and a volunteer Air Force to go defend this country and that have allowed us to salute one flag. It is our responsibility and our duty. And while we carry out that responsibility and duty, one may be misunderstood every now and then. And if it is about being misunderstood, then that means that you are not leading.

My mother served in this Congress, Mr. Speaker, prior to my arrival here, and she said, "Son, if you are not misunderstood from time to time, you are not leading."

I am glad to pick up periodicals, and I am glad to see the kind of discourse that is taking place on television, folks talking about what the Congress is doing, because you know something? At least we are doing something about the status quo. No longer will this House stand by, Mr. Speaker, and watch those that are unelected carry out the duties that the Congress should be carrying out.

I have been on the Armed Services Committee now three Congresses, Mr. Speaker, and I can tell you many times I sit there and I watch individuals that are on the panel before us, and I kind of want to ask the question, but I don't want to be sarcastic by saying, I hope you are not filling me with confidence that the troops have everything they need.

When I came to Congress, we went into Iraq. I wasn't here for the vote to go or to give the President authority or what have you, but I was here, and I remember asking the question, are we ready for this guerrilla warfare once we reach Baghdad? That answer was, "yes." Do we have the equipment in place? That answer was, "yes." Do we have up-armored vehicles in place? That answer was, "yes."

News report after news report, document after document this big, Mr. Speaker, says the contrary. Two trips to Iraq represents something different from what I heard here in a committee room in the Rayburn Building that the troops have what they need. Well, guess what? We no longer want to go off of what someone tells us in Washington, D.C., that is happening or not. We want the President to have to be able to confirm that there is a need for additional troops or to send additional troops to Iraq. We want to make sure that the troops know that there is a Congress here that is going to put that language in place to make sure they have what they need.

I can't tell you how many marines and how many soldiers told me, sir, with all due respect, sir, I will be here as long as you want me here, but I went on a patrol the other night, and I didn't have the proper equipment. I didn't have the up-armored vehicles. And it takes a Member of Congress to go to someone and say, I heard a patrol went out last night and didn't have what they needed.

□ 1630

We are not trying to make command decisions on the ground. We are just trying to make sure the men and women have what they need.

Also within this supplemental that we are looking at is legislation that prohibits the deployment of troops that are not fully mission capable as defined by the Department of Defense. In other words, troops who are not fully trained, equipped and protected by the standards of the Department of Defense will not go.

Now, this is what the Department of Defense has asked for. Why can't the Congress then back up the Department of Defense and say we agree with you, even though we know you have not been practicing some of the things that you have adopted as policy?

The President can only deploy unprepared troops if he certifies in writing to Congress that the deployment of those troops are in the national interest. That means it is imperative that we send troops that are untrained and unprepared into harm's way. The President has to confirm that it is within the national interest that that should happen. That is not taking his powers away as Commander in Chief, it is just putting in another level of accountability, making sure that the President knows that there is a Congress here that is willing to carry out the accountability and the oversight that is needed.

It also provides that the Veterans Administration has to meet the obligations of the new generation of veterans that will be coming out of two of these wars.

There are two wars going on, Mr. Speaker. A lot of folks forget. Iraq? Okay. Afghanistan. But guess what? There are two different wars going on. Because of the lack of planning in the Iraq war, troops were sent to Iraq from Afghanistan, and guess what? The Taliban is back and strong in Afghanistan. Now we need more troops, more coalition troops, because of the decisions that were made in a Congress that did not provide the oversight that it should have provided to make sure that we brought about ultimate accountability. I think it is important that we endorse the philosophy that we are going to prepare for what is to come.

It is time for the Iraqis to take control of Iraq. We say it all the time. In this bill, the bill will require that the Iraqi government has to meet key security, political and economic benchmarks that were established, Mr. Speaker, by the President of these United States on January 10 when he addressed this Congress. What is wrong with that? The President said if it doesn't happen, then they will see a withdrawal and we will not be there forever. I am paraphrasing. This is what the President said.

Now, being a Member of Congress, now going on my third term, I think it is very important for us to understand,

there are some things that the President has said during the State of the Union that ended up being reality, or becoming reality, and there are a lot of things that he said that did not.

I trust the fact that the Commander in Chief and Members of Congress will not send someone into war unprepared. I will trust that. I would want to believe that. But we know that it has happened, where we failed our troops as it relates to getting them what they need.

But I think it is important for us to understand, Mr. Speaker and Members, it is very, very important that we put in the language of this supplemental, which I must add, let me break this down more, when I say defense supplemental bill, that means this is an appropriations bill that is going to be \$100 billion that will go towards operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and in other parts of the world as it relates to this issue of fighting terrorism. But it should not be a blank check. It should not be a one line bill.

Some would like to leave it up to the Pentagon. Leave it up to folks who we don't have any idea, the public, who they are. Unelected individuals. Leave it up to them. They know what is best. They are the professionals.

Well, I believe in professionalism too. But when I go down to the Seventeenth Congressional District of Florida and my constituents ask me, Congressman, what did you do to make sure that my tax dollar is being spent appropriately? "Well, they just said send the money. I thought it was important. We just voted and let them deal with it."

It is not an us and them. It is a we. And when money is spent in an inappropriate way, when you have companies like Halliburton and other contractors that are under investigation, I must add, that are still receiving contracts, U.S. Federal contracts, the taxpayer dollar, then we have to have accountability.

Now, I don't know anyone that really has a problem with that. I can go to a rally of conservative to the right of the right of the right Republicans and ask them, do you want accountability measures in a \$100 billion-plus supplemental bill, or do you just want us to pass it and say leave it up to whoever is making the decisions in whatever department they are in with no-bid contracts and allow some of the things that happened in Iraq, when companies get a flat tire and then they torch the truck and we buy a brand new tractor-trailer because it was better for the company if they just replace the truck. Which one do you want? Do you want accountability measures in it? Do you want benchmarks in it? Do you want to have hearings?

Do you see the number? Oh, goodness, I am glad the staff changed this for me, Mr. Speaker. It is that quick. I started talking about last week's numbers. I get new numbers. Ninety-seven hearings held on Iraq oversight. Do you want this? Or do you want seven hear-

ings? Which one do you want? Do you want 96 hearings, or do you want seven?

We have Members around here complaining saying, oh, well, you know, I don't necessarily like all this, you know, what is going on.

Well, it is our job. When we have two wars going on and we have the kind of lack of fiscal responsibility that has not been taking place here in this House prior to the arrival of the Democratic controlled Congress, you have to sleep in shifts. You have to make sure you do what your obligation is, to have oversight.

I think it is important to be able to make sure if the Iraqis fail to meet the benchmarks, that it will mean the beginning of a U.S. withdrawal and that it will also restrict economic aid to the Iraqis.

The bottom line is, you cannot reward bad behavior or lack of good behavior. You can't reward that. You can't say, well, no, that is okay, that is fine. Take your time, whatever the case may be. Don't worry about it.

I'll tell you, there are some Iraqi forces that are fighting. There are some Iraqi forces that are doing some good things. But there are some folks within the Iraqi government that do not understand the urgency we have here.

The longer we are in Iraq, the more I have to tell my U.S. mayors, my Governors, my school board members, my constituents, no, I cannot help you with your project. No, I cannot help you, Governor, as it relates to the transportation dollars to help Florida become even a stronger State in the United States of America. Mr. Mayor, I know it is important that we have security in our community. Mr. Sheriff, I know it is important that you want that COPS Program back. But guess what? We have two wars going on. We got a tax cut for the super-wealthy that the President of the United States wants, and we are too busy fighting them on that. And meanwhile, we got folks foot dragging over in Iraq about accountability. They don't have any urgency. Some folks don't even have the urgency we have here in the United States.

This is snatching bread and butter out of the mouths of U.S. taxpayers and their children. Do you know why the interest rates went up on the student loans? To be able to pay for tax cuts for the super-wealthy, and to also continue the business of saying let's just rubber stamp supplementals and send it to the President of the United States and the Bush administration and the Department of Defense. And it took an election to bring about the kind of paradigm shift and the thinking that we should have done on our own as responsible adults and elected to U.S. Congress. It took an election to do that.

Thank God for democracy. Thank God for level-minded Americans saying I am going to put my party aside for a

moment. I have to stand up on behalf of my children, because this is now becoming personal. You have veterans that have served and that have fought and that have allowed us to salute one flag who are just turned, totally, politically about who they sent to Congress, and they made a change. And we are not going to sit there and allow their vote and their prayer and their hope that there will be change here in Washington, D.C., and just sit by and say we want to go along to get along.

Someone says something about maybe I am doing the wrong thing, and who am I to try to govern a war from Washington, D.C.? It is not governing a war. It is bringing about the kind of accountability that the American people have cried and have asked for.

The Bush administration and the Republican majority in the past are far, far behind where the American people are. And if we have to drag, pull, through this House and push legislation through to bring us up-to-date to where the American people are, that is what we were sent here to do. And Members who don't want to be a part of that experience, they have to go home and they have to face their constituents.

Believe what I am telling you right now. It is not just individuals that are walking around with flowers and saying "I don't believe in war" that are saying that we have to bring some accountability to what we are doing. There are individuals that work hard, individuals that have retired, individuals that are looking for a better future for their family. You have local government officials that don't even know how they are going to survive from this point on because we are sitting around here cutting taxes for individuals who are not even asking for tax cuts.

Mr. Speaker, let me say this: Super-wealthy billionaires that are not even marching the halls of Congress and saying please give me a tax cut, they are not asking for it. The Republican Congress just gave it to them.

So this paradigm shift, I want to prepare the Members, Mr. Speaker, that it is going to take some courage, and it is going to take some leadership, and we are going to be misunderstood. But you know something? Time after time again, history has reflected on leadership in a good way.

I can tell you right now, a perfect example, Mr. Speaker, and then I am going to move to the next point, when the Walter Reed story broke about what was going on at Walter Reed, and the Newsweek cover of this specialist here, this amputee that served and the kind of treatment that our soldiers were receiving at Walter Reed, the vindication for the Democratic majority was the fact that before this article came out, before we even knew of a Washington Post story, or probably even before the reporter started working on the story, we had an appropriation continuing resolution that we had

to pass because the Republican Congress did not do their job and pass their appropriations bill, and we put \$3.6 billion towards veteran healthcare because it was the right thing to do.

And the good thing about it is that I could stand here on this floor without any Member being able to march down here and say otherwise, that we did what we had to do because we had the opportunity to do it. And that is what is so good about good leadership.

I am glad NANCY PELOSI is the Speaker of the House, and if there are some Members that have a problem with that, then they have a problem with leadership, because this could have happened last year, it could have happened the year before last.

The Bush administration has passed time after time again budgets that have cut veterans healthcare. Again, Bush Republicans, see this, Mr. Speaker, I am going to tell you right now, I can't think of anything else I could be doing outside of making this point right now. This is very, very important. And I want my Republican colleagues to be with us on this change that we are working on. I want our new Members in Congress to understand their responsibility as it relates to the American people and what they sent us here for.

We have to have resolve, just like the men and women on the front line have resolve. We have to have resolve, just like the veterans who went out there and laid their lives down and watched their friends pay the ultimate sacrifice. We have to have that same resolve. We have to have that political courage, like they have to have the courage to go outside the gates of Camp Victory in Iraq.

We have to have that same resolve here in this House. We cannot allow someone just because they say something about you or they think something about you when you are right, that you are going to turn around, just because someone on the minority side, on the Republican side, is saying well, look what they are trying to do.

Well, you know something? I say to my Republican colleagues, in all due respect, and many of them are my friends, especially the leadership, the bottom line is when you are pointing your finger and saying look at what they are doing, you need to be looking in the mirror and saying you had the opportunity to do it and you didn't do it, and we are not getting back in the same boat that you just got out of. We are going to do it. We are going to grab a paddle and we are going to go down the stream.

Summer of 2005, at the Democrats' pressure, the Bush administration finally acknowledged that FY 2006 shortfall in veteran healthcare was totaling \$2.7 billion and Democrats fought all summer to get it.

March 2006, President Bush budget cut veteran funding by \$6 billion over 5 years. Passed by the Republican-controlled Congress.

□ 1645

January 31, 2007, Democrats increase VA health care budget by \$3.6 billion in a joint resolution funding.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I tell my colleagues who are against that kind of action to go home and tell your constituents that you are against that. I welcome you to do it because you won't be a Member of Congress anymore. I am so glad I was on the prevailing side of \$3.6 billion going into veterans' health care.

I say all of that because we use key words like accountability, oversight. We talk about a new direction and fiscal responsibility. I can tell you, there are many times here on this House floor that Members are going to have to go see the wizard and get some courage. That courage is very easy because the American people are egging on this kind of spirit that is in Washington, D.C., right now.

I think it is important that, even after all of the articles and even after all of the talk about what went on at Walter Reed dealing with our veterans, that the Democratic-controlled Congress sprung into action, not weeks, not months down the road, not years down the road, sprung into action. Articles came out in the Washington Post. I have it right here. We don't come to the floor to play around or waste Members' time or staff time. I think it is important to talk about the fact that articles came out on the 24th. There was a review panel. We looked at the Army Times article that came out in September 2006, but when articles started rolling out on the 19th and after that on the 26th, and then on March 2nd because we were on President's break, the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform subpoenaed one of the major generals who was fired, who was head of Walter Reed after Army officials refused to allow him to testify before the committee.

Mr. Speaker, that is what oversight is about. It was not firing a general. It is about getting down to the truth. And, of course, the administration took the position to ask him to step down.

March 5 of this year, this is all recent, oversight in Committee on Government Reform began holding investigation hearings into the Walter Reed scandal.

March 6 and 7, House Veterans' Affairs Committee holds hearings on Walter Reed scandal.

The same day, March 7, House Armed Services Committee holds Walter Reed scandal hearing. I was there.

Mr. Speaker, with all due respect to all members in the Army and those who came, and Secretary Chao and all of the folks over at the Pentagon, they did apologize. They did say they were sorry. I can give them credit for that. But I am thinking about the men and women, as we continue to peel back what has been happening at Walter Reed, and as we continue to learn about other DOD medical facilities and

the service that they are not providing, as we learn these things, we have to go about correcting them.

I would much rather appropriate dollars to make sure that someone's uncle, someone's mother, someone's daughter, someone's nephew who laid it down on behalf of this country gets what we said we would give them. That is quality health care, accountability and oversight.

If any Member has a problem with that, they need to evaluate themselves or their purpose here in Congress. I am glad to hear many Members saying to the Army: Tell us what you need. Now there will be strings attached, and there will be language to bring about oversight. And there will be individuals who will be paying attention to what you are doing. The old days of giving you the money and you just doing what you want to do are over. Accountability measures will be in place.

As we start to look at next week and as we start to move into next week, I think it is important that folks understand that this is going to be an open House, and we are going to promote government and crack down on waste. That is what next week is going to be all about. Next week is going to be about trying to crack down on waste and for us to start turning this around and balancing the budget. And of course, only Democrats can say we have actually balanced the budget because we have. Republicans had 12 years of control and did not balance the budget. They talked about it but did not do it. We did it.

To be able to say that, again, we need to crack down and highlight and investigate waste. We are here representing the American people. We are not just here representing ourselves. No, I am not here to represent Kendrick Meek. I am here to represent those who have sent me here and those that are counting on us to do the things that we have to do.

The Democrats have pledged to end the culture of corruption in Washington, making the Congress accountable to the people by sheer good government. What is wrong with that?

Next week the House will consider measures to ensure that the Federal Government is open and accountable to the American people. The legislation that is going to be brought up next week is going to be the whistleblower reforms, strengthening protections for Federal whistleblowers to prevent abuse, a lack of accountability. We want to empower those who want to step forward and say, there is corruption and waste over there. We want to insulate those individuals. They are our heroes and the heroes within the Federal Government and contracting world pointing out waste.

When we have countries like OPEC and China owning so much of the American pie, in the billions, that is a national security issue. So we need to treat these individuals accordingly.

Also next week, Presidential record disclosure, which nullifies the 2001

Presidential executive order and restores public access to Presidential records. That is important. Of course, there will be language as relates to super national security issues. They won't be able to touch those.

Presidential library donations, require the disclosure of donors to Presidential libraries. We have a lot of that going on. Additional material will be shared next week as it relates to the bills that will be coming to the floor, but I think it is important that we have the kind of flow to the House floor that we need to have to be able to prepare ourselves to govern for the rest of the 110th Congress.

Now, Mr. Speaker, as we continue in the 30-Something Working Group to look at issues that we travel the country to hear Americans and those that have come to Washington, D.C., looking for accountability; as we carry their prayer and their hope, and again I am not talking about proud Democrats, I am talking about all Americans, it is our obligation and responsibility to make sure that they get the best representation possible. And it should not be in the back halls of Congress, a deep secret in the corner or some sort of special meeting in the corner over here. It should be under the lights of this Chamber and to make sure that every Member understands.

One of the other principles of the 30-Something Working Group, on this side of the aisle and the Democratic Caucus, we want to make sure that every Member knows exactly what he or she is doing and has the information that they need, so they know what is coming up, they know what we have done, they know the responsibility that we have to carry out as Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, not as Democrats or Republicans, but as Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, because we don't want the American people to be cheated in anyway by saying, you know, when I voted on that, I didn't quite know what was going on. I'm sorry I voted against that, veteran.

If you voted against the continuing resolution, then you voted against \$3.6 billion on behalf of veterans' health care.

Now for you to be a Member of Congress and not to know that, something is wrong, because that is the number one group that is counting on you to do the right thing on their behalf. They have families, too.

They are elderly, too. They allow us to be able to salute one flag. I say that time and time again. I get chills, bumps every time I say it, because it is important.

My children have a better value for the service that our men and women carry out because they hear me talk about it constantly. We travel and we talk and read about foreign countries and what is happening there. America is the best and the most free country on the face of the earth, and we want to keep it that way. Whatever we have

to do to keep it that way, we are willing to do it. But we are going to do it in a coordinated fashion. We are not just going to do it entrusting others somewhere in some building in Virginia, Maryland, or Washington, D.C., that are not empowered and validated by the people of the United States of America and sent here to watch out for their best interest.

There are parents right now, when I go grocery shopping in my district, Mr. Speaker, I have parents walk up to me and say, Congressman, my son is 16, how long is this Iraq thing going to be going on?

I have to be brutally honest with them. I say, listen, as we talk about redeployment of troops, we have to understand, we are still in Korea and we are still in Germany. But the real issue is, we have to bring about the kind of coordination that is needed on the accountability end. We don't want to be putting brigades and platoons and saying, you run over here. That is the generals' job. That is not what we are doing.

We are making sure that the troops have what they need so when a general says, go over here or send three brigades over there, they have all of the equipment and logistical support that they need, and they have their mission and they have the things that they need to carry out that mission. That is what we are calling for.

We are also calling for the Iraqi government to stop playing with the United States Government. It will not be allowed. So give us more time, give us another chance, don't worry about it, as long as the U.S. troops are there, and other countries have already announced redeployment of their troops. We are sending more troops. You heard the number, and I will close with this, a number that I shared with you at the beginning, March 8, 10 a.m., 3,178 troops gone.

The next day, the next day, 10 a.m., March 9, 3,186 troops gone. That is the next day.

So this is beyond serious. These are families. And there are individuals that are counting on us to lead, and as long as you have a Democratic majority in this House, they will get that leadership because the will and the desire is there. The political courage is there to do it, and the American people are 110 percent behind accountability, fiscal responsibility, moving in a new direction. They are in that circle with the leadership of this House right now.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Speaker and the Democratic leadership for allowing the 30-Something Working Group to have an hour two nights ago and tonight to share the message with the Members of the House. It was an honor addressing the House.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

By unanimous consent, leave of absence was granted to:

Ms. ESHOO (at the request of Mr. HOYER) for today.